

22 Pentecost, 2011.

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Discipline is a word in our culture that usually raises eyebrows,
or conjures up feelings of pain,
something that isn't fun,
or something to be avoided.

This is was my understanding of discipline growing up.

When I heard the word "discipline,"

to me, it meant anything from not being able to play with my friends,

to getting spanked with the belt for something I had done (or left undone).

Little did I realize at the time that there is a difference between discipline and punishment.

In the dictionary discipline is defined as training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.

It is controlled behavior resulting from disciplinary training: self-control.

Discipline is supposed to bring us closer to obtaining a specific goal.

A lack of discipline, conversely, prohibits us from achieving a goal.

Talk to any successful athlete,

musician,

doctor,

or teacher.

Each of them will tell you it took a tremendous amount of discipline to be successful in achieving their goals.

Another way to look at discipline is to see it as actions or attitudes that can become a part of our normal behaviors;

as we do something consistently,

it becomes a habit.

It's like driving a stick shift.

When you first begin to drive a manual,

it takes a lot of effort and concentration not to grind the gears (or stall entirely!)

But after you have been doing it for awhile,

it becomes natural.

In the ancient church,

there were seven disciplines that Christians attempted to follow.

The seven practices were:

fasting;

receiving holy communion;

prayer;

tithing;

keeping the sabbath;

observing the liturgical year;

and making spiritual pilgrimages.

As we are heading towards consecration Sunday next week,

and given our gospel reading today,

I thought it might be helpful to talk specifically about one of these disciplines:
tithing.

One of the earliest examples of Christian writings that we have from the first century,
is known as the “didache,”

or, The teachings.

The didache was a set of teachings comprised by the twelve apostles,
and intended for new converts to Christianity.

The section on giving in the Didache reads,

“Give to everyone who asks you,
and do not demand it back,

for the Father wants from his own gifts to be given to everyone.

Blessed is the one who gives according to the command,
for he is innocent...

Do not be one who stretches out the hands to receive,
but withdraws them when it comes to giving.

You shall not hesitate to give,
nor shall you grumble when giving,
for you will know who is the good paymaster of the reward.”

To give a tithe,

means to give 10% of our income back to God,
through the church,

not because God needs money to pay off His Macy’s bill,
but rather, so that you and I can experience what it means to give back to God,
from what he has given to each of us.

To experience the joy of having to live on faith,
and to see God deliver.

The principal of tithing is found throughout the bible.

The writer of Leviticus states,

“Every tithe of the land,
whether of the seed of the land
or of the fruit of the trees,
is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord.”

In the book of Deuteronomy we are told,

“You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year.”

And God declares something shocking to the prophet Malachi! He instructs,

“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse,
that there may be food in my house.

And thereby put me to the test,
says the Lord of hosts,

if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is
no more need.”

Wait, what?

Did God just say put Him to the test?

This is the only place in scripture,
where God plainly states that we are to test him!
He challenges us to test him,
to trust him,
and to have faith in him,
specifically with our money.
God wants to bless us,
in every area of our lives:
in our relationships,
in our work,
in our communities,
and in our finances.
But take notice of something,
God states that when we give abundantly,
we will never have need.
This does not mean that we will all be driving a new Mercedes,
or traveling across Europe on holiday in our private jet.
What it does mean, though,
is this:
when you are concerned about whether or not to tithe,
because are overwhelmed with bills and expenses,
God challenges you to put Him to the test.
If we take seriously the fact that God is indeed faithful to fulfill his promises,
then instead of writing your mortgage payment first,
or your car or credit card payment,
going to buy that new TV,
or even getting groceries,
write your tithe check first.
When Jen and I began to tithe,
we knew the only way we would do it,
is if we wrote that check first.
It's the first thing we do on payday.
And just like the person who trains to run a marathon,
or the person who drives stick shift,
it's no longer difficult,
but rather it has become second nature to us.
When we do our budget for what we have as expendable income,
we calculate after we have already tithed.
And you know what,
God has always provided for us.
I used to think,
shoot,
I can't afford to give that much of my money to God!

But after I started doing it,
I realized that I couldn't afford not to!
Some folks see 10% as way too much to have to give.
A pastor once said to me,
no,
90% is too much for God to let you keep!
Tithing is not easy at first.
It requires us to think counter-culturally.
It forces us to look closely at how we spend our money.
For some of us,
it requires reevaluating what we treasure.
When we talk about tithing as a form of Christian discipline,
money isn't really the central focus of our financial discipleship, but rather, it is simple living.
We need to ask ourselves why we are having a difficult time tithing, or even believing we need to do it.
Maybe those things we have deemed more important are prohibiting us from giving joyfully back to God.
Tithing should not be painful,
stressful,
or come from a sense of obligatory sacrifice.
Instead it should be something that makes us smile,
that brings satisfaction,
and hope.
Hope that God is faithful to the do things He has promised us:
to never leave us nor forsake us;
to care for us like a great parent;
and to make sure that all our needs are met.
What a wonderful thing!
To be so reliant upon God that the cares and occupations of our lives begin to melt away.
How does this happen?
Let's look at this difficult gospel reading,
the parable of the talents.
It can appear to be harsh.
But as you read it through a few times,
it begins to make a lot more sense.
The master has given each of the slaves money to take care of,
"each according to his ability."
After he returns from a long journey,
the three slaves greet the master with their earnings.
The first two had been diligent with their finances.
They put the money to work,
and made something from their investments.
These first two slaves both acknowledge the job they had been given:

to do something with what their master had entrusted them with.

They both declare,

“Master you handed over to me five [and two talents, respectively],
see I have made more money for you.”

The Master replies joyfully,

“Well done,

good and trustworthy slave;

you have been trustworthy in a few things,

I will put you in charge of many things.”

Both of the first two slaves desired to bring satisfaction to their master,

to be obedient and to show that their top priority was to please Him.

The third slave,

the one who simply buries his money so as not to lose it,

has a different priority:

to protect his own behind!

He states,

“Master,

I knew that you were a harsh man,

reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed,

so I was afraid...”

Immediately the slave is on the defensive,

giving excuse why he failed.

His reaction tells us that he knew what he did was not what he was supposed to do,

but he was too afraid of his master,

and I wonder if he wasn't also afraid of the feeling of failure, and so he didn't do anything at all.

He was his own top priority,

not pleasing the master and doing as he was commanded.

This is why,

the master was so angry!

He had entrusted all three with money that he believed that each could manage,

and the last one,

through his disobedience,

screams that he thought the master to be a liar.

He must have thought the master was unfair in giving him a responsibility that he could not handle.

This parable is about what happens when we misuse our gifts,

and so, it is essentially about priorities.

What is most important to us in our own lives?

The bible tells us that where are treasures are,

there our hearts are, also.

The focus of biblical tithing is on what we can do,

out of a grateful heart,

to serve God, our master.

God has entrusted each of us with resources,
the question for us is this:
what are we going to do with them?
Let us feel the joy and exhilaration wash over us,
as we take the leap of faith,
and put God to the test.
Amen.